

**A Culture of Dialogue.  
Vision, Pedagogy and Dialogic Skills for the RE Classroom.**

‘We are called to promote a culture of dialogue by every possible means and thus to rebuild the fabric of society...’ (Pope Francis, 2016)

## Introduction

These are the words from Pope Francis when accepting the Charlemagne Prize in May, 2016,<sup>1</sup> and the challenge is great: a rebuilding of society through a “culture of dialogue” - but where to begin? From a cultural standpoint, under the auspices of the Pontifical Council for Culture, the Catholic Church has made a beginning with the initiative *Courtyard of the Gentiles* that aims to bring together Catholics and influential others regarding areas of mutual interest in cultural, political and social spheres (Franchi, 2014).<sup>2</sup> From an educational perspective, the desire of Pope Francis for a “culture of dialogue” is firmly embedded within the Congregation for Catholic Education (2017: Para. 14) and its declaration that:

Education to fraternal humanism has the weighty responsibility of providing a formation of citizens so as to imbue them with an appropriate culture of dialogue. Moreover, the intercultural dimension is frequently experienced in classrooms of all levels... so it is from there that we must start to spread the culture of dialogue.

This paper concurs with the above assertion that a culture of dialogue begins in the classroom and, from a UK perspective, affirms the widespread support for RE that ‘...is critical, outward looking, and dialogical’ (Clarke & Woodhead 2015: 34). Further, it heeds the concern of Castelli (2018: 146) that in the secondary sector of schooling ‘we need to teach

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<sup>1</sup> [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20160506\\_premio-carlo-magno.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/may/documents/papa-francesco_20160506_premio-carlo-magno.html) [retrieved 21 August 2018]

<sup>2</sup> The Courtyard of the Gentiles held its inaugural meeting in Paris (2011) and since then has held meetings in the Italian cities of Florence, Palermo, Rome, Bologna and Assisi; the European capital cities of Tirana, Stockholm, Barcelona, Berlin, Prague, Budapest and Bucharest; and across the Atlantic in Argentina, Uruguay and the US.

pupils how to dialogue...’ This need to learn how to dialogue is also a concern for Trethewey and Menzies (2015: 9) who advocate the use of a “safe space” in order to enable students ‘...to be taught the linguistic and behavioural tools to ask questions and to... learn from each other in a non-threatening way.’ The creation of such a safe space within UK schools and classrooms lies at the heart of RE pedagogy today as noted within the Interim Report of the Commission On Religious Education (2017: 26):

The phrase ‘a safe space to discuss difference,’... was the most often quoted single phrase across the evidence gathering sessions. Teachers and subject experts alike turned to it to explain the distinctive place of RE in the curriculum. This is not ‘safe’ in the sense of ‘sanitised’ but rather a space where people can talk – agree and disagree – freely about the contentious issues raised by worldviews.

The use of a safe space within schools to discuss contentious issues and to enable students to develop dialogic skills is the focal point of the research fieldwork undertaken for this study (Xxxx, 2019). From a pedagogical perspective, this safe space or neutral zone for the discussion of worldviews within a school is analogous to the public sphere within society i.e. through pedagogy, the classroom or school serves as a microcosm of society. In response, then, to the call of Pope Francis for a culture of dialogue across society and within our schools, this paper examines two of the three signposts: *vision*, *pedagogy* and *dialogic skills*.

## **Vision**

Pope Francis speaks of the Catholic Church having a role to play with ‘...rebuild[ing] the fabric of society’. At present, there are, broadly speaking, three different understandings as to how this rebuilding process can take place (see Table 1 below).

Table 1

The Three Thomisms

	<i>Augustinian</i>	<i>Whig</i>	<i>Dominican</i>
Society comprises	2 realms	2 realms	3 realms
Secular Stance	Oppositional	Accommodationist	Radical
Pedagogy	Confessional, catechetical	Liberal, critical	Abductive, Dialogic

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Unlike some commentators, Pope Francis does not adopt an oppositional, *Augustinian Thomist* stance towards Western societies in whose perception:

Throughout the Western world, the culture no longer carries the faith, because the culture has become increasingly hostile to the faith. Catholicism can no longer be absorbed by osmosis from the environment, for the environment has become toxic.

(Weigel, 2013)

In response to this toxicity, Weigel (2013) proposes a form of evangelical Catholicism ‘...that will equip the Church for its evangelical responsibilities in a time of great challenge.’ Church communities will be radically renewed as they prepare themselves to re-propose Catholicism to the world (Mallon 2014). According to Dreher (2017: 69) this period of preparation ‘...call[s] for a *strategic separation* from the everyday world’. Augustinian Thomists routinely reject modern Western culture. Coining the term, the ‘Benedict Option,’ Dreher (2017: 11) argues that,

The currents of culture have become so antithetical to Christianity that if we're going to form ourselves and our kids in the authentic faith, we're going to have to have some kind of limited withdrawal. What do I mean by that? I mean to put your kids in an authentic Christian school, for example.

Within conservative circles of Catholicism there is much support for this approach (e.g. Esolen, 2017). However, with an eloquent critique of the Augustinian Thomist stance, Rolheiser (2016: 47) affords 'prophetic' insight to a different, accommodationist understanding of secular culture thus:

**The voice of God is also inside secular culture.** [emphasis added]

...Secular culture is not the Antichrist. It ultimately comes out of Judeo-Christian roots and has inextricably embedded within its core many central values of Judeo-Christianity. We need, then, to be careful as cultural warriors, not to be blindly fighting truth, justice, the poor, equality and the integrity of creation. Too often, in a black-and-white approach, we end up having God fighting God.

A prophet has to be characterised first of all by love, by empathy for the very people he or she is challenging.

This different, prophetic stance towards secular culture is held by the Whig Thomists who believe that they have sufficient wisdom to re-Christianise this secular culture. They point to the Judaeo-Christian roots of secularity and are in agreement with Rolheiser's assertion that 'The voice of God is also inside secular culture.' A similar argument is put forward by Smith (2008: 2) who contends that secularism is '...the latest expression of the Christian religion... being Christian ethics shorn of its doctrine'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Glendinning (2017: 23) holds that secularisation '...is a mutation... an alteration within an event that we can call the Christianisation of the world'.

This sympathetic, accommodationist view towards Western societies is encapsulated by the adoption of the term “Whig” i.e. ‘...the heirs of the Scottish Enlightenment, which emphasized economic and political liberty, or an emerging philosophy known as liberalism...’ (Rowland, 2005) The Whig Thomists seek to work with the prevailing liberal values within Western societies and to Christianise them (Novak, 1991) and, indeed, they contend that liberal values themselves are rooted in Christianity:

...Western democracy owe(s) its essential intellectual origins and legitimacy to Christian ideals, not to any Greco-Roman legacy. It all began with the New Testament. (Stark 2005: 76)

Such an approach, though, is unlikely to be acceptable in this secular age (Taylor, 2007).<sup>4</sup> The citizens of secularised, pluralist Western societies are unlikely to welcome an approach from the Catholic Church in which the Church seeks to re-Christianise their underpinning, liberal values.

Strategically, both Augustinian Thomism and Whig Thomism have an inherent weakness and share a common misunderstanding. Both these forms of Thomism envision Western societies as comprising two realms – *sacred* and *secular* – and both misappropriate the term “secular”.<sup>5</sup> For Augustinian Thomists, the secular realm is enemy territory that is to be ignored whilst the Catholic Church regroups in preparation for a process of a re-

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<sup>4</sup> Support for this being a secular age is underpinned by a wealth of scholarship e.g. see Calhoun et al (2011), Mendieta & van Antwerpen (2011), Moreland (2012), Parker and Reader (2016), Schuller (2006) and Williams (2012)

<sup>5</sup> As envisaged by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI (2009) there is a ‘...positive spirit of secularism which makes it possible to promote a constructive civil coexistence, based on reciprocal respect and loyal dialogue...’

evangelisation. However, for Whig Thomists, the secular realm comprises old friends who have gone astray but who can be cajoled and persuaded to return to their former ways.

The weakness of the position adopted by the Augustinian Thomists is that in their desire to retreat from the secular realm for the purpose of renewal, they may not fully take into account the ingrained secularism prevalent within the West. Indeed, as Casanova (2011: 67) contends: '... people are not simply religiously "unmusical" but are actually closed to any form of transcendence beyond the purely secular immanent frame'. Given this lack of "musicality" and closure to the transcendent then the prospects for a successful re-evangelisation of the West appear to be slim.

The weakness of the approach mooted by the Whig Thomists, according to Rowland (2003: 159), is that it comprises an admixture of Christian and liberal values within western societies that has resulted in a process of 'heretical reconstruction' or 'secular parody' e.g. whereby '... a divine directive to "love your neighbour" has been transmuted into "tolerance".' Seeking the good of others seems incomprehensible to people who have been acculturated through liberal values to allow others to do as they wish. Likewise, then, the prospects for the successful Christianisation of liberal values within the West appear distant.

A route out of this impasse is offered by Markus (2006: 5-6) who re-appropriates a radical<sup>6</sup> understanding of the Early Church with regard to the term "secular" with the following definition of a three realms' model of society:

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<sup>6</sup> as from Late Latin *radicalis* i.e. "of or having roots."

- a) *Sacred* - ‘...will be roughly coextensive with the sphere of Christian religious belief, practises, institutions and cult’ e.g. participating in mass, attending Bible studies class, etc.
- b) *Profane* - ‘...will be close to what has to be rejected in the surrounding culture, practises, institutions...’ e.g. abortion, pornography, etc.
- c) *Secular* - ‘...does not have such connotations of radical opposition to the sacred; it is more neutral, capable of being accepted or adapted...’ e.g. attending school, discussion in a pub, etc.

The role of the secular realm is to be a bulwark between sacred and profane and to serve as a neutral, public sphere that welcomes all views. The problem for religious institutions is their declining influence in the public spheres of economics, politics and science and a lack of serious religious debate within major centres of cultural influence such as the government, media and institutes of higher education (Moreland, 2012). A solution for the Catholic Church can be found in *Evangelii Gaudium* whereby Pope Francis refers to ‘...building consensus and agreement while seeking the goal of a just, responsive and inclusive society.’ Such a just society would have a fortified secular realm in which the voices of religious institutions would be clearly heard. Notably, the creation of this society requires the Church to *seek alliance* with liberal thinkers.

From a Christian perspective, this vision of a post-secular society is a clear improvement upon the situation today. Moreover, there is a realistic prospect of success. Rather than an Augustinian Thomist approach of ‘tilting at windmills’ *Don Quixote* style to re-evangelise the secular realm; or a Whig Thomist approach requiring a Herculean cleansing of the *Augean Stables* to transform the secular into the sacred; there is a clear-headed alliance between the Catholic Church and classic liberal thinkers to create a genuinely post-secular

society. That such an alliance *should* be attractive to liberal thinkers is underscored by no less than Habermas, regarded as ‘...the personification of liberal, individual, and secular thinking’ (Schuller 2006: 15). In a revision of his earlier thinking and writings, Habermas (2006) argues for a *post-secular society* in which he envisions a neutral state authority that acknowledges both religious language and religious imagery have the potential to express truth.

Habermas’ vision is of a post-secular society in which religion returns to a renewed public sphere in which religious imagery and language are freely used. Other eminent liberal theorists have also revised their views of religion in the public sphere e.g. John Rawls who accepts in a late work ‘...that religiously motivated arguments should be accepted as publicly valid...’ (Calhoun 2011: 78). Such a vision of a broad-based alliance between liberalism and Catholicism is supported by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, who comments:

What, then, ought we to do? ...I am in broad agreement with Jurgen Habermas’ remarks about a post-secular society, about the willingness to learn from each other, and about self-limitation on both sides. (Ratzinger 2006: 77)

This principle of self-limitation underpins the vision of a post-secular, pluralist society created through an alliance between Catholic and liberal thinkers. At a *strategic level*, the Catholic Church will need to recognise that a post-secular society will not be a form of Constantinian or mediaeval Christendom; rather it will be a *pluralist* Christendom ‘...within whose walls unbelievers live together and share in the same temporal good’ (Maritain 1938: 166). In so doing, the Church will help to create ‘...a vitally Christian orientation in the new political order while assuring justice and freedom for non-Christian groups’ (Ibarra 2013: 122). In such a just society – a pluralist Christendom – both liberals and Christians will ‘...take seriously each other’s contributions to controversial subjects in the public debate’

(Habermas 2006: 47). At present, the Church's views may be afforded serious recognition with regard to matters of personal morality such as abortion, divorce, same-sex relationships that are the subject of political debate and government legislation. However, in the public sphere discussions concerning technological and medical advances are dominated by economic, political, sociological and especially scientific voices (Smith 2008). For a theological voice to be taken seriously in the public sphere, then self-limitation seems a price worth paying.

And so, for her part, at a *practical level*, in the common pursuit of truth and truthfulness, the Catholic Church will require to impose upon herself the self-limitation of not making '...a direct appeal to the absolute, a transcendent notion of ultimate truth, [as this] is a step outside the bounds of reasoned public discourse' (Calhoun et al 2011: 19). For the creation of a post-secular society, the admission price for the Catholic Church to influence public life is a focus on human reasoning.

Correspondingly, if the secular realm in a post-secular society is one in which the public sphere of debate is marked by self-limitation, then the liberal traditions will also need to accept the self-limitations of restraint from advocacy of secularist ideologies that contend religion should be banished from the public sphere or that religion is held to be a purely private matter. This principle of self-limitation imposes the restriction of accepting *political liberalism* and discarding *comprehensive liberalism*. As advocated by John Locke, political liberalism envisioned a society in which persons from diverse traditions altered their ways of thinking and acting in response to conversations with others: this took place in an environment supported by the values of freedom and tolerance. Guaranteed by the state, these values

...gradually ceased to be a means to the greater end of the pursuit of truth and justice, and instead became reified as ends in themselves. As a result, Locke's political liberalism gave way to a comprehensive liberalism in which the ideal society is not one that pursues truth and truthfulness, but one that maximises autonomy and tolerance. In such a society, rather than defend their particular exclusive beliefs and explore the exclusive beliefs of others in a common quest for truth, representatives of particular traditions must abandon their exclusive beliefs because they are deemed to undermine freedom and breed intolerance. Instead of imagining a genuinely open pluralistic society harbouring a range of different traditions and contradictory belief systems, we must imagine a closed monolithic society living in peace and harmony only because its members have abandoned their exclusive truth claims *en masse*. (Wright 2013: 110)

And so, comprehensive liberalism has paved the way for various secularisms and for secularization. In order, therefore, to successfully create a post-secular society, it is necessary that those from the classic liberal tradition adopt and promote political liberalism at the expense of comprehensive liberalism.

This alliance between liberalism and Catholicism founded upon a principle of self-limitation has been termed *Dominican Thomist* (XXXXXX, 2019). It is *Thomistic* in that it focuses on the power of human reason. It bears the label of *Dominican* in that with her discussion of the Dominican Order, Sister Augusta Theodosia Drane (1988: 71) comments that it:

...has constantly been true to its vocation as the organ of popularizing truth. It has borrowed from *the spirit of the age to supply the wants of the age* [emphasis added].

Perhaps it is Charles Taylor (2007: 9) who comes closest to capturing the wants and spirit of this secular age when he speaks of '...the power of cool, disengaged reason, capable of contemplating the world and human life without illusion, and of acting lucidly for the best in

the interest of human flourishing'. In this secular age, the answers are found neither in philosophical theories, nor moral codes, not even in religious devotions: they are to be found in human reasoning. And so a *Dominican Thomist* response to this want for human flourishing in a secular age would be to borrow from the spirit of the age: human reasoning.

Thus, a Dominican Thomist response is to accept the principle of self-limitation and collaborate with others to fortify the secular realm in the creation of a post-secular, pluralist society: but where to begin? Not with the current adult generation that has become acculturated to liberal values to the extent that it finds Christian values incomprehensible: but with the *future adult generation*. With this generation the realisation of a post-secular, pluralist society is possible; and so we arrive at the second signpost, pedagogy.

### **Pedagogy**

Pedagogy is often construed as the method and practice of teaching<sup>7</sup> but herein it is understood as a relationship between classroom practices and wider society that is recognised as performing a '...crucial role in the process of social reproduction i.e. the process whereby a society reproduces itself over time and so maintains its identity across the generations...' (Carr, 1993) But pedagogies need not only be concerned with social production and preservation of society's status quo since:

... (as) mainsprings of schooling. They can serve... as levers of social production. They can be in the vanguard of social change... (Hamilton 1990: 5)

Pedagogy as social production is required for the creation of a post-secular, pluralist society. That social change can be effected through religious education (RE) pedagogy is an argument

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<sup>7</sup> <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/pedagogy> [accessed 06 March, 2019]

made by RE professionals (Chater & Erricker, 2013) and, indeed, there is a surprisingly high level of political interest<sup>8</sup> afforded to RE pedagogies.<sup>9</sup>

However, working in partnership with classic liberalism to achieve this social change requires a high degree of sensitivity from the Catholic Church, as ‘...education is commonly prized as both the heir and the custodian of liberal principles’ (Conroy & Davis, 2008: 188). The Church should tread softly. Also, the Church should heed the advice of Gearon (2013: 104) that there is a fundamental or ‘incommensurable’ difference between pedagogies ‘...related to the religious life... [and those] ...more closely related to secularity’. That is to say, for pedagogy as social production, rather than confessional pedagogy, it may be advisable to fashion pedagogy that ‘...arise(s) from bringing religion and education into a relationship within the context of a secular education system serving the needs and interests of... a diversely plural society’ (Grimmitt 2000: 15). The United Kingdom’s world of RE is rich with pedagogies that have arisen in response to the issues and difficulties posed by secularity and pluralism:<sup>10</sup> but which pedagogy fulfils Habermas’ vision of a post-secular society?

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<sup>8</sup> e.g. the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE. 2007. [Online] *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*. Available from: <http://www.osce.org/odihr/29154?download=true> [Accessed 18 May 2018]; and even the CIA – Liam Gearon, *MasterClass in Religious Education. Transforming Teaching and Learning*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Religious education in the UK has a rich history of differing pedagogies e.g. World Religions approach as mooted by the Chichester Project; Curriculum Development approach advanced by the Westhill Project; the Spiritual Experientialist approach as envisaged by the Religious Experience and Education Project; Critical Pedagogies born from the Children and Worldviews Project; Christian Pedagogy advocated by the Stapleford Project; Humanist Pedagogy as outlined in Grimmitt’s classic *RE and Human Development*; Philosophical Pedagogy as supported by the Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education (Xxxx, 2010); and Confessional Pedagogy as outlined by SCES (2011).

<sup>10</sup> e.g. Blaylock, Six Schools of Thought in RE. *REsource: Professional Reflection on Theory and Practice in Religious Education*. 27(1) 13-16, Autumn, 2004; Gearon, *MasterClass in Religious Education*; and Grimmitt, *Pedagogies of Religious Education*.

Habermas envisages a post-secular society in which religious language and images have the potential to express truth. Not only do such language and images have a legitimate place within public debates but Habermas also has an expectation that ‘...the secularized citizens play their part in the endeavors to translate relevant contributions from the religious language into a language that is accessible to the public as a whole’ (Habermas 2006: 51-52). This clearly entails dialogue between those with faith and those without faith; and a genuine commitment to understand each other. Indeed, it implies that each side must collaborate to produce a “common language”. Which RE pedagogies are best suited to this task?

Two in particular stand out. First, it calls to mind critical pedagogy which regards itself as ‘...a theology concerned with questions of ultimate truth...’ (Wright 2000: 172) This critical pedagogy creates intelligent conversations between the horizon of the students and the horizons of religion; such conversations are concerned with questions of ultimate truth. Second, it resonates with the proposal of Castelli (2012) for an RE faith-dialogue pedagogy that develops students’ skills in articulating their own beliefs whilst responding to others’ belief systems. Therefore, such critical dialogic RE pedagogy would be characterised by students conversing intelligently about ultimate truth claims through analysis of arguments and evidence. In so doing, they would develop their own belief systems in response to the beliefs of others. How well, though, does this critical dialogic RE pedagogy sit with the teaching of the Catholic Church in regard to Catholics and those with a different faith or no faith? It sits remarkably well, in fact.

The value of the Church working with others through education to create a harmonious society is acknowledged by the Congregation for Catholic Education in the introduction to its

2013 document – *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools: Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love* – whereby it contends that:

Education contains a central challenge for the future: to allow various cultural expressions to co-exist and to promote dialogue so as to foster a peaceful society... Schools have a great responsibility in this field, called as they are to develop intercultural dialogue in their pedagogical vision.

So, there is an established principle that Church schools should create a peaceful society: and a starting place is dialogue within the classroom.

In the modern world, the Catholic Church seeks and encourages dialogue with those of other faiths and of no faith. As Pope Francis remarks in his first encyclical letter ‘...the security of faith sets us on a journey; it enables witness and dialogue with all’.<sup>11</sup> His predecessor, Pope Saint John Paul II, set down the marker for this journey in dialogue with his encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio*:

Dialogue does not originate from tactical concerns or self-interest, but is an activity with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity... Those engaged in this dialogue must be consistent with their own religious traditions and convictions, and be open to understanding those of the other party without pretense or close-mindedness, but with truth, humility and frankness, knowing that dialogue can enrich each side. There must be no abandonment of principles nor false irenicism, but instead a witness given and received for mutual advancement...<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis. 2013. Encyclical Letter. *Lumen Fidei*. 29 June 2013. 34. Available from: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/francesco/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130629\\_enciclica-lumen-fidei\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei_en.html) [accessed 18 May 2018]

<sup>12</sup> Pope Saint John Paul II. Encyclical Letter. *Redemptoris Missio*. On the permanent validity of the Church’s missionary mandate. 07 December 1990, 56. Available from: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html) [accessed 18 May 2018]

This is a robust understanding of dialogue in which there is no suing for a false peace. Parties to dialogue, Catholic and non-Catholic, are encouraged to remain true to their beliefs and to engage frankly with each other. At the heart of such dialogue is a common pursuit of truth.

Recently, research has been undertaken with the aim of embedding a “culture of dialogue” in RE classrooms through the introduction of the dialogic skills of building consensus (cumulative talk) and constructive criticism (exploratory talk). The initial action research project (Xxxxxx, 2014) took place within the unusual context of Catholic pupils being taught Roman Catholic religious education (RCRE) in state-funded secondary schools. For most of the academic year they attended religious and moral education (RME) classes but for a few weeks they participated with RCRE. A total of twenty pupils in Years 10 and 11, comprising ten Catholic and ten non-Catholic students, participated in a series of three interventions through the medium of paired conversations that focused on science and religion, values and historical evidence. Their conversations were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively with regard to the dialogic skills of cumulative talk and exploratory talk, and deep learning in RE. The students displayed high levels of engagement with both cumulative talk and exploratory talk and statistical analysis, through a chi-square test, indicated a significant amount of deep learning taking place.

The first intervention promoted high levels of on-task activity amongst the students (>92%) and good levels of engagement with cumulative talk (>63%). For the second intervention there was a fractional increase in on-task activity and higher levels of engagement with exploratory talk (>35%); whilst the third intervention produced similar returns to those of the first. Furthermore, another important feature of the three interventions was that the students

adopted a deep approach to learning. According to Atherton (2011), among the key features of such learning are:

adopted a deep approach to learning among the key features of which are:

- (a) relating previous knowledge to new knowledge;
- (b) relating theoretical ideas to everyday experience; and
- (c) organising and structuring content into a coherent whole.

Additionally, the students were asked to sum up (anonymously) in a sentence what they thought about this experience of learning in RE. All twenty of the students responded positively, and cited primarily pedagogical and social reasons as given below in Table 2.

Table 2  
Students' Responses  
(n = 20)

Pedagogical (n = 12) e.g., 'A learning experience that enables you to see other people's views and perspectives and ultimately how your beliefs compare' and 'It's very good for learning about the things that are difficult to get your head around; also it helps me accept others' opinions and attitudes towards religion'.

Pedagogical and social (n = 4) e.g., 'Allowing me to learn by listening to other people's points of view, which often contrast with my own, has greatly benefitted my understanding of some Catholic ideas; and has done so through a medium which I find enjoyable'.

Social (n = 4) e.g., 'I think this has been a more interesting way of learning in RE [and] I've enjoyed listening to other people's thoughts and feelings on certain issues in this small group as you can express your feelings without being judged by your class'.

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(source: Xxxxx 2014: 70)

This action research in RE proved to be a very rich experience and there was sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the interventions helped to develop the twenty students' dialogic skills through promoting both cumulative talk and exploratory talk. However, note must be taken of the cautionary words from Hattie (2012: 2) that '... almost any intervention can stake a claim to making a difference to student learning'. Another limitation of this action research study was the small sample size of twenty students from one school. It would be advisable for any future study to increase the number of participants such that the analyses can have more robust statistical significance. Also, the sample should be across different types of secondary schools as the school used in this study can fairly be described as an academically high-attainment city comprehensive. Attention should be paid to schools of different types (e.g. faith, selective) with different locations (e.g. suburban, rural), and with different overall levels of attainment.

Due attention was paid to sample size in a subsequent doctoral study (Xxxxx, 2019) with sixty-five students participating; and these students were drawn from four faith schools, five academies and a comprehensive sited across a variety of city-centre, suburban and rural domains. In terms of attainment all four of the Ofsted rankings were represented i.e. outstanding, good, requires improvement and special measures. With regard to the dialogic skills of cumulative and exploratory talk in RE the research findings are of significance and interest; and it is to this third signpost of dialogic skills that we will turn in a subsequent article.

## **Conclusion**

Addressing secularisation, Pope Francis envisions that the Catholic Church become a partner in the rebuilding of society through a culture of dialogue but there are major obstacles to be

overcome. Two broad oppositional movements have emerged within the Catholic Church: Augustinian Thomism and Whig Thomism. The former decries secularisation as being inimical to Christianity and, in its form of the Benedict Option, this movement seeks strategic separation from Western societies prior to a process of re-evangelisation. The latter movement seeks accommodation with the liberal values underpinning secularisation since it recognises their Christian roots and aims to re-baptise them. However, secularism is so ingrained within the West that the prospects of success for either movement are slim.

A possible solution is proffered whereby, there is a *Dominican ressourcement* or return to the thinking and practice of the Early Church, and Western societies are rethought as comprising sacred, secular and profane realms. In this model of three realms the role of the secular is to act as a buffer between the other realms. The building up and fortification of the secular realm requires restraint from both liberals and Christians through the adoption of the principle of self-limitation as termed by Pope Emeritus Benedict and Jürgen Habermas. For liberals, this requires ceasing to relegate matters of religion from the public sphere to the private and recognizing that religious views and language have a legitimate contribution within this new post-secular society. For Christians, this necessitates ceasing to lay claim to supernatural revealed truths and focusing, rather, on *Thomistic* reasoning.

Pope Francis proposes that a culture of dialogue between liberals and Christians should begin in the classroom; and the UK has a rich history of pedagogies that have arisen and developed in response, partly, to secularisation. In particular, there is a need to focus specifically on dialogic skills and a forthcoming paper shall examine such dialogic pedagogy. The research fieldwork was undertaken with ten secondary schools of varying backgrounds across the UK

and the findings, as with the initial action research, offer promise for this vision of a culture of dialogue.

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*There is no conflict of interest.*

[6305 words]

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